

Street art, The ghetto badge of honour

On the hostile streets of some of Kingston and St Andrew's impoverished communities, they stand out like colourful placards declaring the value of the ghetto to the wider Jamaica.

Like giant billboards used to advertise the latest must-have pair of jeans or a clothing store's going-out-of-business sale, the murals painted on walls in inner-city neighbourhoods advertise the fact that the persons depicted in the paintings are the sons and daughters of the community. It's a powerful symbol of pride for the people of these places and getting the images right is vital.

Andrew Thomas was the Waterhouse artist given the job of painting a mural of Shelly-Ann Fraser, who is from the St Andrew community, just after she won gold at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

"Well it was a great feeling. I do a lot of work on cars and even clothes, but there was a greater pleasure in painting Shelly-Ann," said Thomas.

He admitted though, that there was some amount of added pressure on him to get the mural right. "Well it was something that everybody in the community would be waiting to see. Everybody know Shelly and love her, so if I didn't get it right, everybody would be angry," he said.

"It took about a week to finish. I had to make sure that I got it right," he laughed.

Thomas lives close to the site of the mural and now takes pride in watching the children of the community taking pictures next to his creation.

"When you paint a mural, you not just painting something for a single customer, you really doing it for everybody in the community to enjoy. Plus you have to remember that Shelly-Ann going to come home and see it, so you want her to like it. You have to make sure it look like the real person," he said.

In nearby Riverton Meadows, the subject of the community mural is dancehall artiste Bounty Killer who lived in the community for several years.